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## The Isaiah Rice Collection at D. H. Ramsey Library, UNC Asheville

The Isaiah Rice Collection presents vivid images of African American life in Asheville, North Carolina, from the 1950s through the 1970s, and builds on other existing collections within Ramsey Library. Isaiah Rice was an Asheville native who lived from 1917 to 1980. He graduated from Stephens-Lee High School, worked with the Works Progress Administration, was an Army veteran, and worked as a delivery truck driver. He married Asheville native Jeroline Bradley Rice in 1942 and was father to Marian Waters.<sup>1</sup> His grandson Dr. Darin Waters is a professor of history at UNC Asheville. Marian Waters and Dr. Darin Waters donated the collection to the library in 2015, and it was officially unveiled on October 23 at the second annual African Americans in Western North Carolina Conference at UNC Asheville.<sup>2</sup>

More than 100 images from the Rice Collection have been made available online through Ramsey Library's Special Collections, but these are only 1/10 of the total collection. Isaiah Rice photographed couples and small groups of people at their homes, churches, and along the streets as he passed by. Known as the "picture man," Rice apparently considered his cameras carefully. He owned and used a Zeus/Ikon Ikoflex, an Ansco Speedex, a Kodak Duaflex, a Polaroid, and most interesting, a Minox-B "spy" camera.<sup>3</sup>



*Isaiah Rice*

These relatively expensive cameras demonstrate his seriousness about photography.

The Rice Collection documents significant time periods in African American culture and history, especially in this mountain town. As Waters, Hyde, and Betsalel remind readers, Isaiah Rice collected these images "during the post-World War II era of uneven national economic development, continued racial segregation, the ongoing fight for civil rights and racial equality, and the subsequent years of suburbanization and urban renewal in Asheville."<sup>4</sup> Asheville's African population during the 1950s to the 1970s ranged around 20%, compared to less than 8% African American population in Knoxville, Tennessee, and less than 4% in the ten counties surrounding Asheville. Thus, Rice's portraits of

everyday life speak against the "trope of African American 'insignificance' in the region." Yet, the images are not overtly political. There are no signs or slogans, no marches, but instead there are people going to church, to work, to the pool, or having dinner as a family.

Among the most compelling photographs are several related to church life. The camera captures people before and after services, images of church elders, a wedding, and a worship leader holding up a sheet of paper. There are also multiple pictures of couples, sitting on steps, standing outdoors, and crossing the street; pictures of children playing, groups of men talking outside buildings, and people just crossing the street. Many of these pictures seem taken on the spur of the moment rather than specifically posed. Most of the people in Rice's photographs smile at and seem at ease in front of the camera—reacting to a friend rather than some impersonal "photographer." These everyday images, documenting the life and work of their subjects, provide the primary sources to challenge the "incomplete picture."<sup>5</sup>

The addition of the Isaiah Rice Collection strengthens and supplements Ramsey Library's other photographic collections, including the Ball Collection and the Heritage of Black Highlanders Collection. Another significant local area collection with is



*Street Scene in Downtown Asheville*

the Andrea Clarke Collection held in the North Carolina Collection of the Pack Memorial Library, a branch of the Buncombe County Public Library.

Although the Ball Collection, with more than 11,000 images of local people and places, is perhaps the best known of UNC Asheville's photograph collections, it has relatively few images including African Americans. The Andrea Clarke Collection at

nearby Pack Library contains roughly 500 images, documenting African American people and places from this neighborhood during a period of urban renewal in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Clarke's photographs include various buildings—among them the Stephens-Lee High School that Rice attended—and street scenes, as well as images of people outdoors or talking in groups.<sup>6</sup> Thus, there is some overlap of time period and type of photographs with the Rice Collection. Some of Clarke's photographs are collected in her book, *East End Asheville Photographs Circa 1968*, published by the North Carolina Humanities Council.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps the best collection for fit with the Rice Collection, though, is the Heritage of Black Highlanders Collection, which was established by Asheville teacher and principal Lucy Herring. This collection was one of the first acquired by the university's Special Collection and celebrates its 40th anniversary with the founding of UNCA's Special Collections, which was originally established as the Southern Highlands Research Center in 1977. The Heritage of Black

Highlanders Collection contains images of African Americans at school and in armed service, at work, church, and in civic organizations. It covers the period 1888 to 1972.<sup>8</sup>

Among highlights of this collection are images of Floyd McKissick and his father Ernest, a photo of famous singer Marion Anderson visiting Stephens-Lee High School, and photographs of several "firsts" including the first African American disc jockey, the first African American employee of the NC Employment Security Commission, and the first African American voter registrar in western North Carolina. DigitalNC recently made this collection available online at <https://www.digitalnc.org/exhibits/heritage-of-black-highlanders>.

Taken together, the Isaiah Rice Collection and the Heritage of Black Highlanders Collection offer library



*Delivery Driver*



*Lucy Herring, Teacher and Principal*

users documentation of a nearly a century of African American life in Asheville. Gene Hyde, Head of Special Collections and University Archives for Ramsey Library describes the impact of this collection on users' appreciation for the diversity of the region: "The Isaiah Rice Collection is important in helping people understand that southern Appalachia is historically much more diverse than

is widely believed, and challenges the traditional belief that African Americans were ‘insignificant’ in Appalachia.” Response to the Rice Collection has been very positive in Asheville and in the Appalachian Studies community. Visitors are welcome to view the Rice Collection at Ramsey Library.

*Special thanks to Gene Hyde, Head of Special Collections & University Archivist, UNC Asheville*

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Darin J. Waters and Gene Hyde and Kenneth Betsalel. “In-Between the Color Lines with a Spy Camera: The Appalachian Urban Folk Photography of Isaiah Rice.” *Southern Cultures* 23, no. 1 (2017): 92-113. <https://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed May 26, 2017).
- <sup>2</sup> “Isaiah Rice Photograph Collection.” UNC Asheville Archives. <http://unc-asheville-archives.blogspot.com/2015/10/isaiah-rice-photograph-collection.html> (accessed May 26, 2017).
- <sup>3</sup> Waters, Hyde, and Betsalel.
- <sup>4</sup> Waters, Hyde, and Betsalel, 94.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid., 94-96.
- <sup>6</sup> “Twilight of a Neighborhood: Asheville’s East End circa 1970,” *HeardTell: The North Carolina*

Room, Pack Memorial Library. <https://packlibraryncroom.wordpress.com/online-photo-exhibits/twilight-of-a-neighborhood-asheville-east-end-circa-1970/> (accessed May 31, 2017).

- <sup>7</sup> Andrea Clark, *East End Asheville Photographs Circa 1968*. Charlotte, NC: North Carolina Humanities Council, 2009. <http://library.digitalnc.org/cdm/ref/collection/booklets/id/29992> (accessed May 31, 2017).

- <sup>8</sup> “Heritage of Black Highlanders Collection ca. 1888-1972,” Special Collections & University Archives, Ramsey Library, UNC Asheville. [http://toto.lib.unca.edu/finding-aids/mss/blackhigh/default\\_black-high.html](http://toto.lib.unca.edu/finding-aids/mss/blackhigh/default_black-high.html) (accessed May 31, 2017).

## Images

Isaiah Rice, from the Isaiah Rice Collection, Special Collections, UNC Asheville. © Darin Waters; image used by permission, with thanks to Dr. Waters and the Special Collections at Ramsey Library. Available at <http://cdm15733.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p15733coll11/id/0/rec/52>.

Street Scene in Downtown Asheville, from the Isaiah Rice Collection, Special Collections, UNC Asheville.

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Delivery Driver, Downtown Asheville, NC, from the the Isaiah Rice Collection, Special Collections, UNC Asheville. © Darin Waters; image used by permission, with thanks to Dr. Waters and the Special Collections at Ramsey Library. Available at <http://cdm15733.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p15733coll11/id/49/rec/18>.

Lucy Herring, Teacher and Principal, from the Heritage of Black Highlanders Collection, Special Collections, Ramsey Library, University of North Carolina Asheville, Asheville, NC. Available at <http://library.digitalnc.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/ncimages/id/29872/rec/158>.

## Looking for help with collection development?

If you want to expand your library’s collection of novels set in North Carolina, you should visit the Read North Carolina Novels blog hosted by the North Carolina Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (<http://blogs.lib.unc.edu/ncnovels/>).

If your interest in North Caroliniana is more general, the North Carolina Collection at UNC-Chapel Hill regularly posts lists of new additions to their collection at this address: <http://blogs.lib.unc.edu/ncm/index.php/whats-new-in-the-north-carolina-collection/>.